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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, the number of homeless children in America has more than doubled. Educators, however, are still legally obligated to enroll and support them, because of the passage of the "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001, which reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. Although schools cannot solve homelessness, they can take several steps to alleviate its effects. For example, they can get help from shelter directors and staff, McKinney-Vento district liaisons, and Title I staff. Schools can ease enrollment policies and procedures to help homeless families that do not have or cannot afford to order all the required documents by accepting motel receipts, a letter from a shelter, or an official school-enrollment affidavit as proof of residency. Attendance should be made a priority by providing basic needs, such as adequate food, clothing, transportation. Teachers should assess students' "readiness-to-learn" skills, present lessons in short units, and make special homework considerations, such as providing clipboards with attachable lights, and paper and pencils. The article concludes with "A Haven for the Homeless" (Rebecca Kesner). Two recommended books are "A Framework for Understanding Poverty," by Ruby K. Payne, and "Urban Principals Respond: Closing the Gap, Raising the Bar," by NAESP and Educational Research Service. (RT)

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Here's How

Educating Homeless Students

National Association of Elementary School Principals

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Here's HOW
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPALS
VOLUME 20, NUMBER 4
SUMMER 2002

Educating Homeless Students

BethAnn Berliner

By the time Micah reached fourth grade, he had changed schools more times than he could remember—at least eight. During most of his fifth-grade year, he slept in a box behind an industrial-sized dumpster, relying on his father's pickup truck for shelter when it rained.

Much as we might wish otherwise, Micah's story is not unusual. Families with children are the fastest-growing segment of our homeless population. Over the past decade, the number of homeless children has more than doubled—and many are never counted because their families move frequently, try to live invisibly, and avoid authorities for fear of losing custody of their children. However, for an estimated 930,000 homeless children who live in shelters, motels, cars, parks, abandoned buildings, or with other families, school can be a haven, a place free of the chaos and fear that may define their lives.

As hundreds of thousands of homeless children like Micah transfer in and out of schools each year, educators are legally obligated to enroll and support them. The passage of the "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001 reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the federal law that entitles homeless children to a free and appropriate public education and requires schools to eliminate barriers to their enrollment, attendance, and success in school (*see sidebar, page 2*).

BethAnn Berliner is a senior research associate at WestEd in San Francisco and author of Imagine the Possibilities, *a sourcebook for educators who work with homeless students. Her e-mail address is* **bberlin@WestEd.org**.

Helping Homeless Children

While schools can't solve homelessness, there are several steps they can take to alleviate its effects on children. Here are some suggestions.

Get help from people "in the know." Working with shelter directors, McKinney-Vento district liaisons, and Title I staff is a practical way to help prevent families from falling through the cracks.

The first line of contact with homeless families is often shelter staff. If attendance, for example, becomes erratic, good two-way communication between shelters and schools can help principals check on students and get them back on track. Sometimes attendance problems are complicated and require coordinating transportation, before- and after-school care, homework help, and medical treatment. Schools and shelters working together can find childcare for the younger siblings of students who care for them during the day, for example, or accommodate a daytime sleep schedule for students who feel unsafe sleeping during the night.

District staff can help by providing liaisons to interpret complicated policies and procedures, coordinate services, find scarce resources, and track families that frequently move in and out of the community's educational and social service systems. Title I staff can tap resources for transportation, school supplies, supplemental instruction, and counseling for homeless students. (Schools that are not Title I can also qualify for special set-aside district funding.)

Ease enrollment policies and procedures. Although the right of all children to receive a free public education is firmly established in law, children from homeless families can face intimidating barriers. For a number of reasons, homeless families rarely have or can afford to order all of the required documents. Schools can ease this burden

by accepting motel receipts, a letter from a shelter, or an official school enrollment affidavit as proof of residency.

If a birth certificate is unavailable, a birth date may be verified with a passport, bible inscription, baptismal record, or social service form. Having parents sign a personal beliefs exemption or referring students to a health clinic overcomes the lack of immunization records. And, if necessary, a social worker can sign an official caregiver's affidavit as a proxy for the guardianship requirement.

Since a completed emergency card with working telephone numbers and a signed medical release may be impossible to obtain, principals should know that they have the option to contact a juvenile court judge, an emergency physician, or a social service agency for authorization if emergency action is needed.

Make attendance a priority. Even with laws requiring school attendance, homelessness often keeps children from coming to school on a regular basis. Lack of adequate food and clothing, movement to and from shelters or other accommodations, complicated transportation plans, and not having friends at school all make routine attendance difficult.

Some schools address homeless students' basic needs for food and sleep by providing food pantries and rooms for napping. Others have taken on the stigma of poor hygiene by providing laundry facilities, showers, and even treatment for head lice. Recognizing that homeless students may need clothes, some schools distribute donated garments. Other schools supply medical and dental services, and many make special transportation arrangements, ranging from taxi service and bus tokens to rerouting school buses. But perhaps the most effective way to ensure regular attendance is to reach out to homeless families and to follow up whenever students are absent.

Focus on student learning. With homeless children, certain classroom conventions simply don't work. For example, there is no home in which to do homework, report cards rarely reflect the work of a full marking period, and customary strategies to manage classroom behavior sometimes can escalate problems. Here are some tips that may help teachers work with homeless students:

- When homeless students first arrive in their classrooms, teachers should assess their "readiness-to-learn" skills such as listening, following directions, and asking for help. Even students in the upper grades may not have mastered these basics.
- Because homeless students' class attendance is often intermittent or brief, teachers should present lessons in short units that allow students to complete and master material. Likewise, weekly or even daily report-cards-in-progress acknowledge spotty attendance patterns in recording students' social and academic performance. They also provide students with a record they can take to a new school if they must transfer abruptly.
- Special homework considerations should be made for homeless students. A clipboard with pencils, paper, and an attachable light can be a portable desk, making it easier for homeless students to complete their homework. Some schools have adjusted homework assignments to eliminate the need for computers, reference materials, or other special equipment or supplies. Other

No (Homeless) Child Left Behind

The passage of the "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001 reauthorized the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, signaling a renewed commitment to the academic success of children without stable homes. The McKinney-Vento Act is the federal law that entitles children experiencing homelessness to a free, appropriate public education and requires schools to eliminate barriers to their enrollment, attendance, and success in school.

Children fall under the umbrella of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act if they lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Legally "homeless" children live in any of the following:

- Dwellings that lack electricity, water, and other basic services;
- Transitional units, motels, or emergency shelters;
- Parks and other public spaces; or
- Crowded or temporary arrangements with other families.

Principals should know that McKinney-Vento:

- Requires all school districts to appoint a liaison to communicate with homeless families, publicize the educational rights of homeless parents at schools and other agencies that work with families in transition, and oversee district programs for identifying and promoting the enrollment of homeless students;
- Prohibits the separation or segregation of students based on their housing status; and
- Includes policies that make it easier for students to enroll in a new school, stay in their current school even if their residence changes, and benefit from Title I funds regardless of whether they attend a Title I school.

schools have been careful to avoid assignments that require adult involvement.

• Children experiencing homelessness commonly exhibit troublesome behaviors that resist modification by traditional disciplinary methods. But classroom management based on techniques such as self-imposed "time-outs," student-generated class rules, and class problem-solving meetings have been effective with homeless students.

Micah's story did not end when his family eventually got a stable home. He had missed so much school, and had fallen so far behind his classmates, that catching up felt impossible. He stopped attending school in the eighth grade and wound up in a youth detention center during his teen years. Schools can't fix everything for students who are homeless; what we can do is make sure that children without homes are not also children without schools.

The Principal's Perspective

A Haven for the Homeless

Rebecca Kesner

Jane Addams Elementary School in Fresno, California, is a K-6 year-round school in a poor neighborhood of motels, trailer parks, and low-income apartment projects that struggles to overcome the everyday challenges of homelessness and transiency. According to principal Teresa Calderon, about 10 percent of the 1,025 students are homeless and the school has a 64 percent transiency rate—more than double the district average of 31 percent.

"There's not a lot you can do about transiency," she says, "so we focus on serving the families of transient and homeless children through community agencies."Addams Elementary is fortunate in having a neighborhood resource center that is staffed with a probation officer, a K-6 social worker, and a full-time nurse. The center offers free physicals, health education, adult education, parenting classes, provides counseling, and helps families to find work, housing, or day care.

From Calderon's perspective, a principal's most important task in dealing with transiency is to build and maintain close ties with district and community agencies. You have to have a network of people and services that can help you, she notes. The community is often willing to help; "they just don't know the need," she says.

The network should include other district principals, who can provide valuable guidance for a new principal or one who is dealing with homelessness and transiency for the first time. With a strong network of principals, Calderon points out, you can often contact the principal of the previous school attended by a newly enrolled transient for critical data. When you consider that some transient students change schools as many as seven times in a single year, such a network is essential.

Calderon keeps a close watch on attendance and on occasion has had to take action against parents who, under state law, can face fines or jail for failing to keep their children in school. She also provides attendance incentives in the form of "Panther Dollars," which transient children can use to buy items in the school store.

A major concern for Calderon is supporting her teachers, who are constantly challenged to maintain good learning environments in classrooms where students come and go every few weeks. She keeps up staff morale by working closely with her teachers and by providing them with as many resources as they need to provide homeless or transient students with school supplies.

The community's homeless and transient families value the school. Even during their frequent moves, many try to keep their children there despite transportation difficulties. Calderon takes particular pride in the number of homeless students enrolled in the school's gifted and talented program.

"These are some of our brightest kids," she says. □

Rebecca Kesner is editor of Here's How. *Her e-mail address is* **bkesner@naesp.org**.

For more information about programs for homeless and transient children at Jane Addams Elementary School, contact principal Teresa Calderon at **tcalde@fresno.k12.ca.us**.

Web Resources

Here are some Web resources on caring for homeless children:

To learn more about the McKinney-Vento Act, go to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty at **www.nlchp.org**, which provides a brief summary of its major provisions and training materials on how to put the law into practice.

The National Center for Homeless Education provides "information and links to help educators, service providers, and families ensure that homeless children and youth have access to educational opportunities and success in the classroom." It is accessible at **www.serve.org/nche**.

The Department of Education runs the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program. To learn more about it, go to **www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/CEP/hmlsprogresp.html**.

The Center for Homeless Education and Information at William Penn University offers lesson plans that deal with homelessness and other administrative resources at **www.wmpenn.edu/pennweb/ltp/ltp2.html**.

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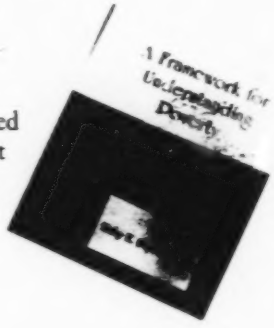
A Framework for Understanding Poverty

by Ruby K. Payne



This book will help you determine how to work effectively with students from poverty. Based on her experience as a principal, Ruby Payne explains how economic class has a direct effect on how students act. You'll also learn about the hidden rules that separate economic classes and instructional intervention that can overcome the obstacles of poverty.

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Urban Principals Respond: Closing the Gap, Raising the Bar

by NAESP and Educational Research Service

This 39-page guide, the first in the *Urban Principals Respond* series, presents an in-depth review of high-stakes testing and the achievement gap while examining successful practices of urban principals. It presents practical approaches for restructuring the school community to yield positive results in raising student achievement, including outreach programs for low-income students and culturally relevant instruction.

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Order from the NAESP National Principals' Resource Center by phone, 800-386-2377; by fax, 800-396-2377; or online at www.naesp.org to receive a 10 percent discount. You may also send a check or purchase order to: **National Principals' Resource Center**, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314-3483.

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